

# A HAVEN BLESSED

## *my garden*

*Ann Bird*

**M**ost gardens featured in publications seem to be quite large and immaculately kept by their owners with professional help. Quite differently, my own comparatively small plot has been planned, planted, and cared for over the last 34 years with just family help, and sometimes coercion, when I needed it. But the joy of creating something of beauty from a completely neglected wilderness of nettles, thistles, and weeds overshadowed by a colossal weeping willow tree covering the entire width of the garden has never left me.

I knew nothing of the art of gardening in those days, let alone how to grow a rose. My husband decided a division of labor was necessary, meaning he would tackle the house and I would attempt to deal with what was outside. The plot is long and narrow, but once the tree was felled, it took on a completely new perspective. And when the enormous task of clearing was done, it looked positively

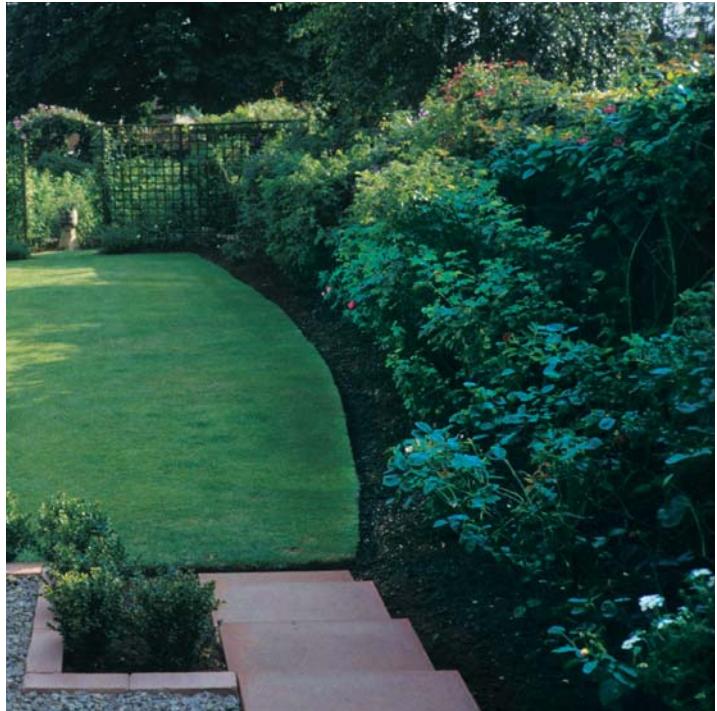
ABOVE: James Mason. RIGHT: Part of Ann's garden in spring. Photos by Ann Bird.

respectable and ready to cultivate—but what to plant? The problem was solved when I came home with six prepacked Hybrid Teas from a local supermarket, dug a hole for them with no preparation of the soil, pruned with scissors, and threw on some fertilizer—all at the same time.

When the roses eventually bloomed, the elation with all this success made me think I really was not just a gardener but a rosarian as well—a very short-lived notion once I joined a local rose society full of experienced exhibitors who soon cut me down to size. They taught me the skills of showing roses, but I needed to have suitable varieties, so the garden was then planted with “bankers” such as *RED DEVIL*, *ADMIRAL RODNEY*, *ROYAL HIGHNESS* and countless others, with specific instructions what to do with them. Manure of all descriptions suddenly became a vital ingredient (which it still is). Sticks topped with conical hats had to be placed over precious blooms at strategic times—the whole garden looked like a Chinese market. Somehow I made it to national level as an exhibitor, but my sweetest moment was to win “Best Bloom” in a large show with *PICCADILLY*, one of my original supermarket roses which had simply grown well on its own. I was not popular that day!

By the early 1980s I was spending all available time in the garden, having discovered how therapeutic rose cultivation could be. When *FÉLICITÉ PARMENTIER* arrived on the scene, my passion for old garden roses was immediate—150 modern roses were lifted, given away, and gradually replaced with sumptuous varieties of old garden roses. The endless pleasure of looking through books and making choices was almost as great as seeing them finally in the garden. Many plants were given as well as bought, and to this day I can remember from whom and from where they came.

Now the question of designing the garden arose. These fragrant old beauties needed to be displayed at their very best and not just at ground level, so my husband was commandeered into making trellis towers, a short pergola, arches, fences





with concave tops, and a bower into which his masterpiece went—a garden seat made to last for ever, complete with a carved rose and the inscription “The Fairest Flower.” I’ve never found out whether he meant the rose, or me! At any rate, the seat has been well used. At dusk on summer evenings just when the colors of the roses absolutely glow and the fragrance is intense, with the dogs at our feet and a glass of whisky in hand, it could almost be paradise.

During the 1980s various new ideas and changing fashions in gardening were emerging, and one of these ideas seemed perfect for my own garden. To shorten the perspective of the long narrow plot and also to make the garden more interesting it seemed sensible to divide it into three separate rooms so that we didn’t see everything at once. In hindsight, this was the biggest improvement made and once the other structures were in place, the picture was complete.

The planting could now take place in earnest. It had been a slow but pleasurable process choosing varieties I particularly wanted to grow and fortunately not

**ABOVE:** Climbing Cécile Brunner. **RIGHT:** Paul’s Himalayan Musk and clematis Marie Boisselot. **INSET:** Rosie and Emily. Photos by Ann Bird.



all had arrived as many roses had to be moved from other positions. The original plan was to have them displayed as families but I abandoned this idea, deciding it was too formal for a garden of this size. I eventually placed them simply where they looked right. By now I had become quite meticulous with the preparation of planting holes. The light sandy soil in this part of Leicestershire soon loses all nutrients, and every activity demanded huge quantities of "cold" (i.e., cow) manure. For almost twenty years I used "hot" (i.e., horse) manure, which seemed to disappear almost immediately. I had no idea there was a difference between hot and cold manure, but once I was on the right track the difference in the soil structure and the quality of the roses was quite amazing.

The top third of the garden became a rectangular lawn with borders of roses graded from front to back according to height, all edged with box. The trellis dividing the first two sections supported *Rosa banksia lutea*, now very large, Banksia hybrid PUREZZA, PAUL'S LEMON PILLAR and CUPID. The second division was com-



pletely clothed in CLIMBING CÉCILE BRUNNER, which stretched across the width of the garden—such a fantastic garden-worthy variety. The final third, although almost completely shaded by a huge horse-chestnut tree carrying a Preservation Order forbidding felling or even trimming, was successfully planted with CRIMSON RAMBLER, ALBÉRIC BARBIER, and GHISLAINE DE FÉLIGONDE, the latter endeavoring to become a climber.

Twenty-eight Ramblers eventually adorned the perimeter fences—favorite varieties such as THE GARLAND, PAUL'S HIMALAYAN MUSK, ADÉLAIDE D'ORLÉANS, PRINCESSE MARIE, to name but a few, with a clematis planted alongside each. SPEC-TABILIS on a north-facing trellis could almost be the star of the show, especially in those years when it bursts into bloom again in late summer. Four plants of CONSTANCE SPRY long ago outgrew their position on one of the trellis towers as did MME ALFRED CARRIÈRE on another, but what a sight they are in full flower.

It would be almost impossible to choose an overall favorite in the bush varieties of old garden roses but the white Alba MME LEGRAS DE ST. GERMAIN would come very close, as would DUCHESSE D'ANGOULÈME, the blush pink silky-petalled Gallica. Another Gallica, NESTOR, is one of my favorites, although fraught with bittersweet memories as my plant once grew in the Royal National Rose Society's Gardens of the Rose at Chiswell Green. When the old garden was finally demolished, I asked for one rose and found NESTOR propped up against my car ready for

transport. It had already been drastically pruned, but the girth at the base was huge and the whole plant was so heavy that lifting it was a major problem. Every care was given it at home. Even with much feeding and nurturing, I feared the shock of moving would prove too great. However, it eventually came back to life and last summer produced some magnificent blooms. But more importantly, it's a link with the Headquarters garden I had enjoyed for so many years.

My garden has not just been about the joy of creation and growing roses, but is a reflection of a way of life—the visits of relatives and friends each summer, an outdoor wedding reception, the assortment of our cats and dogs who made the garden their special patch, a quiet place to think through problems, and the many hours so willingly spent outside working in all weathers.

Two lines from a poem written by my mother, inscribed on a piece of slate attached to the wall of the garden shed, seem a very appropriate way to end this story:

“In safe seclusion let this garden rest  
From all intrusion—’tis a haven blessed”



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*Ann Bird, the first woman president of Britain's Royal National Rose Society (RNRS), is overseeing the planting of the Society's new Gardens of the Rose at St Albans. Ann is passionate about building membership of the RNRS in order to return it to its former role as the leading rose society in the world. Ann gardens in the center of England at Market Harborough in Leicestershire. She was a founder member of the RNRS Historic Roses Group in 1990 and eventually served as chair for three years.*

**LEFT:** Princesse Marie and clematis Princess of Wales. Photo by Ann Bird. **ABOVE:** Nestor.  
Photo by Barbara Worl.